

## **Lecture 7. The Christology of Karl Rahner**

In this lecture, we will move forward to the twentieth century and begin a two-part study that considers the Christology of two influential Catholic theologians from this period, Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx. Rahner and Schillebeeckx exemplify two classically distinct approaches to the person and saving work of Christ. Rahner views Jesus as the completion of God's good creation. In Jesus, God's desire to communicate God's Self to the human family reaches its fullness in history.

**I. Biographical Remarks:** Karl Rahner was a German Jesuit, who lived 1904-1984. Served as a theological advisor (peritus) at Vatican II. Worked on the commission that drafted key documents, including those on the Church and divine revelation. Influenced by the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola (Spiritual Exercises) - God communicates God's Self to us.

**II Vision of God and Creation:** The starting point is God's desire to offer God's Self freely to human beings. We have been created in such a way that we are open to God's self-communication. We are beings of self-transcendence; there is a dynamism for the Infinite within us.

God as Holy Mystery: Both creation and God's offer of grace are pure gift - but the Judeo-Christian revelation suggests that God created the world in order to have a recipient of grace - "God wishes to communicate himself, to pour forth the love which he himself is. That is the first and last of his real plans and of his real world." - Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* (Crossroad Publishing Company, 1973) vol. 1, 310.

If God freely offers God's Self, certain things must follow: The offer must be made to a being of freedom. It must be a universal offer (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4); the unity and common destiny of the human race. The offer must be incarnational because each human being is a unity of spirit and matter. Rahner takes the position of Scotus on the question of the motive of the incarnation. The incarnation is "the summit and height of the divine plan of creation." -Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5, 185.

All human beings search for an "absolute savior" - for the definitive mediation of salvation - the absolute savior must be one in whom the culmination of God's self-communication and the human acceptance of God's self-communication takes place.

**III. The Life and Ministry of Jesus:** Rahner gives a strong affirmation of the true humanity of Jesus - radical dependence upon God and genuine human autonomy grow in direct, not inverse, proportion. Jesus must have had a real human history - he had a unique human consciousness - conscious of his unique immediacy to God and of his unique redemptive mission - the earthly Jesus knew himself to be the absolute and unsurpassable Savior - but this does not entail detailed, objective knowledge of the future - Jesus grows in knowledge in a more ordinary sense: ". .. the experience grew ever stronger in him that his mission was bringing him into mortal conflict with the religious and the political society" Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (Spring Valley, NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), 248. "A genuine human consciousness must have a unknown future ahead of it." Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 250.

Jesus was part of the religious milieu of his people and his historical situation, a radical reformer. He was in radical solidarity with the social and religious outcasts of his day. He was convinced of the closeness of the Reign of God. "According to his own self-understanding [Jesus] is already before the resurrection the one sent, the one who inaugurates the kingdom of God through what he says and what he does in a way that did not exist before, but now does exist through him and in him." - Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 254. In the face of the hostile reaction to his proclamation, he faced death resolutely.

**IV. Death and Resurrection:** Human freedom is ultimately the capacity for definitive self-disposal before God - the capacity to become a certain kind of person in and through the free decisions one makes throughout life. In and through death human beings have the possibility of attaining the fullness of freedom and achieving a definitive disposal of themselves before God.

The death of Jesus is the paradigmatic instance of right dying and the means of the transformation of death - Luke 23:46 (Psalm 31:6). To this point, Rahner says: "And so you let yourself be taken from yourself. You give yourself over with confidence into those gentle, invisible hands. We who are weak in faith and fearful for our own selves experience those hands as the sudden, grasping, merciless, stifling grip of blind fate and death. But you know that they are the hands of the Father." Karl Rahner, *Prayers and Meditations: An Anthology of the Spiritual Writings of Karl Rahner* (Seabury Press, 1980), 101.

The unity of the death and resurrection of Jesus: "The death of Jesus is such that by its very nature it is subsumed into the resurrection." Rahner emphasizes Jesus' resurrection as completion. The resurrection of Jesus means "the permanent,

redeemed, final and definitive validity of the single and unique life of Jesus who achieved the permanent and final validity of his life precisely through his death in freedom and obedience." Karl Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith, 266.

**V. Soteriology:** Stress on the universal salvific will of God (1 Timothy 2:4).

"Salvation here is to be understood as the strictly supernatural and direct presence of God in himself afforded by grace." Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations, vol. 16, 200. "... it is precisely a God who loves the sinner originally and without reasons who is the cause of his [her] reconciliation." Karl Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith, 283.

Rahner's use of sacramental causality: Sacraments cause grace because and insofar as they signify grace - the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the sacrament, the efficacious sign, of God's saving grace and its victorious and irreversible activity in the world.

A personal relationship to Jesus Christ: Every believer is called to a unique relationship with Jesus Christ. The humanity of Jesus remains the abiding mediation of the immediacy of God to us. Christian life entails, "the always unique call of God which is mediated in a concrete and loving encounter with Jesus in a mysticism of love." - Karl Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith, 311.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. What is your initial reaction to Rahner's Christology? What about it appeals to you? What do you find difficult to understand or accept?
2. Do you think of Jesus' resurrection more in terms of completion or correction!
3. How do you respond to Rahner's use of sacramental causality in his soteriology?
4. Reflect on Rahner's observation that the Christian life entails "the always unique call of God which is mediated in a concrete and loving encounter with Jesus in a mysticism of love." What does Rahner's statement mean to you?